

# JOSIAH KIBIRA OF TANZANIA: ECUMENICAL STATESMAN



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JOSIAH KIBIRA OF TANZANIA

ECUMENICAL STATESMAN

Original Biographies from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* with commentary by  
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Committee Member

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Shobana Shankar relates how Christian missions and African converts transformed religious practices and politics in Muslim Northern Nigeria during the colonial and early postcolonial periods. Although the British colonial authorities prohibited Christian evangelism in Muslim areas and circumscribed missionary activities, a combination of factors—including Mahdist insurrection, the abolition of slavery, migrant labor, and women’s evangelism—brought new converts to the faith. By the 1930s, however, this organic growth of Christianity in the north had given way to an institutionalized culture based around medical facilities established in the Hausa emirates. The end of World War II brought an influx of demobilized soldiers, who integrated themselves into the local Christian communities and reinvigorated the practice of lay evangelism.

In the era of independence, Muslim politicians consolidated their power by adopting many of the methods of missionaries and evangelists. In the process, many Christian men and formerly non-Muslim communities converted to Islam. A vital part of Northern Nigerian Christianity all but vanished, becoming a religion of “outsiders.” (from the cover).

## “Bishop Josiah Kibira of Tanzania, Ecumenical Statesman”

### *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* *Journal of African Christian Biography* Vol 1, No 2 (July 2016)

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* focuses on Bishop Josiah Kibira (1925-1988), first African Bishop of the Northwestern Diocese of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania, and the first African President of the Lutheran World Federation (1977-1984). Kibira’s name is familiar to anyone who has visited the headquarters of the All Africa Conference of Churches in Nairobi, the site of the Bishop Kibira House ([www.aacc-ceta.org/](http://www.aacc-ceta.org/)). His memory is increasingly evoked in Bukoba, Tanzania, where in 2013 was opened the Bishop Kibira University College at Tumaini University Makumira ([www.jokuco.ac.tz/](http://www.jokuco.ac.tz/)). JoKuCo trains teachers and is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. Kibira was also the subject of a 2010 documentary film entitled *Bishop Kibira of Bukoba: An African Lutheran*. Produced by his son, a prominent independent filmmaker, the film is a sensitive portrayal of his life and ministry and includes interviews with people who knew him.

The articles contained in this issue give overviews of Kibira’s contributions. But a few points worth noting suggest why his memory is more relevant today than ever before. First, he was a second generation Christian who was active in the East African Evangelical Revival. As one of the *Balokole*, the “awakened” ones, he brought a strong sense of God’s presence into his life task. During the East African revival, some participating men and women entered into marriages of partnership rather than those arranged by the extended family. Josiah Kibira and his wife Martha Jeremiah married each other across economic and clan differences, united by their common relationship in Jesus Christ. They practiced mutual confession and a high standard of monogamous commitment as part of their evangelical spiritual practices. As inspiration for Christian couples at mid-century, they modeled commitment to marital partnership as Christian witness at a transitional time when urbanization, modernization, and political independence swept the continent.

The Kibiras’ adoption of the concept of the “new clan” of Jesus Christ was reflected in his study, *Church, Clan, and the World*, published in Sweden in 1974. A pioneer work of ecclesiology by an African theologian in

Over the course of the last 1400 years, Islam has grown from a small band of followers on the Arabian peninsula into a global religion of over a billion believers. How did this happen? The usual answer is that Islam spread by the sword--that believers waged jihad against rival tribes and kingdoms and forced them to convert. Lamin Sanneh argues that this is far from the case. *Beyond Jihad* examines the origin and evolution of the Muslim African pacifist tradition, beginning with an inquiry into Islam’s beginnings and expansion in North Africa and its transmission across trans-Saharan trade routes to West Africa. The book focuses on the ways in which, without jihad, the religion spread and took hold, and what that assimilation process means for understanding the nature of religious and social change.

At the heart of this process were clerics who used educational, religious, and legal scholarship to promote Islam. Once this clerical class emerged it offered continuity and stability in the midst of political changes and cultural shifts; it helped inhibit the spread of radicalism, and otherwise challenged it in specific jihad outbreaks. With its roots in the Mali Empire and its policy of religious and inter-ethnic accommodation, and going beyond routes and kingdoms, pacifist teaching tracked a cumulative pathway for Islam in remote districts of the Mali Empire by instilling a patient, Sufi-inspired, and jihad-negating impulse into religious life and practice. Islam was successful in Africa, the book argues, not because of military might but because it was made African by Africans who adapted it to a variety of contexts. (from the cover)

**Shobana Shankar. *Who shall enter paradise? Christian origins in Muslim Northern Nigeria, c. 1890–1975* (New African Histories). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2014. Pp. xxx, 209. \$32.95, Paperback. ISBN 978-0821421246**

*Who Shall Enter Paradise?* recounts in detail the history of Christian-Muslim engagement in a core area of sub-Saharan Africa’s most populous nation, home to roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. It is a region today beset by religious violence, in the course of which history has often been told in overly simplified or highly partisan terms. This book re-examines conversion and religious identification not as fixed phenomena, but as experiences shaped through cross-cultural encounters, experimentation, collaboration, protest, and sympathy.

the immediate post-colonial setting, the book reflected on how the African Jesus-centered “new clan” related to the old ethnic clans. Kibira did research on the relationship between church and clan in three Tanzanian villages, in light of the challenges of inculturating the gospel. His book strongly emphasized the need for African churches to lead themselves while simultaneously building their identities as part of the world church. A second major contribution of Kibira was thus in the difficult work of negotiating the separation from Lutheran missionary paternalism, while retaining valued connections with the world church. As bishop and then head of the Lutheran World Federation, he was thrust into difficult situations where he had to reject longtime missionary personnel, despite his gratitude for their contributions to African Christianity. Being a denominational church leader in the transitional period from colonialism to independence was highly stressful and no doubt took a huge toll on Kibira’s health.

Caught in the squeeze between the old missionary paternalism and the new independence both in church and state, Kibira contributed to the development of post-independence African ecclesiology, missiology, and ecumenical relations. The challenges faced by his generation of church leaders was well expressed when he wrote, “Let me emphasise here, that as long as the African Church is dependent upon Western Churches, it cannot attain real freedom of mind. Are we allowed to criticise and think independently without the threat (and consequent fear) of losing our traditional and universal connection, our financial aid, and in some cases, our theological dialogue with other churches; especially those from which we have emerged?” (p. 63, *Church, Clan and the World*.) He supported the development of African theology, noting bluntly that “Time has come that African theologians stop copying other people's ideas. It is no longer feasible to expect foreigners to do the thinking for us.” (p. 111) Kibira similarly embraced the identity of African churches as themselves missionary churches, part of the flow of ministry to and from all six continents (p. 122-123). As full and equal partners, African Lutheran churches should take their rightful place in the global community of Lutheran churches. He concluded his book with these prophetic words: “That mission is a concern for the whole Church and therefore cooperation and partnership among all Christians are of highest importance and necessity. Our problems are common and worldwide if only we care to understand.” (p. 127)

A third major aspect of Kibira’s contribution was in pioneering

séjour, un logement, un mari. Bref, une vie meilleure. Cet ouvrage est consacré à la manière dont cette espérance sociale a été prise en charge par des prédicateurs et à leurs méthodes, à leurs succès, à leurs échecs. (detail de l’ouvrage)

**Sarah Pugach. *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814–1945*. Pp. xi, 303, \$80.00. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0472117826**

The study of African languages in Germany, or Afrikanistik, originated among Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century and was incorporated into German universities after Germany entered the "Scramble for Africa" and became a colonial power in the 1880s. Despite its long history, few know about the German literature on African languages or the prominence of Germans in the discipline of African philology. In *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814–1945*, Sara Pugach works to fill this gap, arguing that Afrikanistik was essential to the construction of racist knowledge in Germany. While in other countries biological explanations of African difference were central to African studies, the German approach was essentially linguistic, linking language to culture and national identity. Pugach traces this linguistic focus back to the missionaries' belief that conversion could not occur unless the "Word" was allowed to touch a person's heart in his or her native language, as well as to the connection between German missionaries living in Africa and armchair linguists in places like Berlin and Hamburg. Over the years, this resulted in Afrikanistik scholars using language and culture rather than biology to categorize African ethnic and racial groups. *Africa in Translation* follows the history of Afrikanistik from its roots in the missionaries' practical linguistic concerns to its development as an academic subject in both Germany and South Africa throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "Africa in Translation is a thoughtful contribution to the literature on colonialism and culture in Germany and will find readers in the fields of German history and German studies as well as appealing to audiences in the large and interdisciplinary fields of colonialism and postcolonialism." —Jennifer Jenkins, University of Toronto (from the cover).

**Lamin Sanneh. *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 400. ISBN-13: 978-0199351619 ISBN-10: 0199351619**

of these chosen men of God who left their fields, the familiarity of their culture, the security of their families and who, with Bible and water bottle in hand and confidence in their Saviour, took the message of Jesus Christ over the mountain ranges and beyond the rivers to those who had never heard of Him. (from the Foreword).

**Stephen Offutt. *New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii, 192. \$90.00 ISBN 978-1107078326**

This book shows that new centers of Christianity have taken root in the global south. Although these communities were previously poor and marginalized, Stephen Offutt illustrates that they are now socioeconomically diverse, internationally well connected, and socially engaged. Offutt argues that local and global religious social forces, as opposed to other social, economic, or political forces, are primarily responsible for these changes (from the cover).

**Claude Prudhomme. *Missionnaires et Églises en Afrique et à Madagascar (XIX e–XX e siècles)* Anthologie de textes missionnaires, written by Annie Lenoble-Bart (dir.) \$92.90 ISBN 978-2503526485**

L’Afrique et Madagascar ont été, aux XIXe et XXe siècles, un continent parcouru en tous sens par des missionnaires, catholiques comme protestants. Ils ont laissé beaucoup de témoignages. Cette anthologie réunit des documents inédits – souvent à usage interne – qui permettent de revivre un certain nombre de faits saillants de leurs actions, ordinaires ou extra-ordinaires. La variété des textes et des illustrations emmène le lecteur du Maghreb à l’Afrique du Sud ou du Sénégal à la Tanzanie voire aux Congos ou en Zambie, du Burkina Faso à Madagascar en passant par toute la côte du Golfe de Guinée, le Rwanda ou le Burundi. Autant d’occasions d’évoquer, appareil scientifique à l’appui, la Mission dans tous ses états, ses difficultés et ses réalisations, dans des époques et des milieux différents. (détail de l’ouvrage)

**Damien Mottier. *Une ethnographie des pentecôtismes africains en France. Le temps des prophètes*. \$52.31 ISBN 978-2806101419**

L’essor des pentecôtismes ne cesse d’interpeller. En France, la plupart de ces Églises sont des Églises « africaines ». On en recense plusieurs centaines en région parisienne. Les migrants viennent bien entendu y « chercher Dieu ». Mais aussi tout autre chose : des permis de

African contributions to ecumenism. Kibira’s ecumenical spirit came from the interdenominational piety of the East African revival. But it also came from his close relationship with his sponsor Bishop Bengt Sundkler, who sent Kibira to study for an advanced masters’ at the Boston University School of Theology, a well-known locus of ecumenical and missional theology in the early 1960s. Upon Kibira’s return to Tanzania, he was consecrated bishop as the hand-picked successor of Bishop Sundkler. One of his most significant but least noted ecumenical roles was to head the worship at the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968. That an African Lutheran would lead worship on behalf of the host Lutherans of Sweden was a highly visible symbol of the hoped-for post-colonial world church. Unfortunately, the reputation of the Uppsala Assembly as the contentious and divisive “social justice” meeting of the WCC has overshadowed the kind of positive statement made by Kibira’s leadership in that setting.

Bishop Josiah Kibira’s ecumenical commitments are especially important to remember today in an era of intense growth and competition among African Christians. Just as the life of Bishop Josiah Kibira repudiated western missionary colonialism and paternalism, it also reproaches some African church leaders who are busy building their own kingdoms. The biography of Josiah Kibira reminds us that leadership requires the self-sacrificial development of a public ecumenical missional ethic, in which unity for the sake of Christ’s kingdom triumphs over divisive ambitions. Bishop Kibira’s life points prophetically to the present, when African Christians are taking their places as international leaders of the world Christian movement.

**Dana Robert, DACB Editorial Committee Member and JACB Associate Editor**

**Josiah Mutabuzi Isaya Kibira (Article 1)  
1925 to 1988  
Lutheran Church (Balokole Mvt)  
Tanzania**

**By Angolowyse Malambu**

Josiah Mutabuzi Isaya Kibira was born at Kasyenye, Bukoba, Tanzania in late August 1925. He was Haya by tribe. His father's name was Isaya Kibira and his mother, one of two wives, was Esteria. A week after his birth Josiah contracted a fatal illness from which he somehow miraculously recovered. In response, his father gave him the names Josiah Mutabuzi. Josiah means "the Lord heals" and Mutabuzi, a Haya tribal name, means "He is a savior."

Josiah's father died in 1929 when he was four years old. Josiah was the last child born to his mother Esteria who had three other sons and two daughters. His father's last words were "My sons still carry on what I wanted to do and could not achieve."

Josiah was baptized by a German missionary when he was a small boy. After his father died, his mother took on the responsibility of raising him. Josiah, who was very grateful for all that she did for him, wrote about her in 1960, saying, "I was raised by my mother. She tried to teach us how we should follow the Lord and that we had to go to church. She also taught us to pray and sing. I especially learned from her how to pray in faith and very simply. (...) I am always thankful for her efforts." She died in 1984 at the age of 106.

At the age of fifteen, Josiah Kibira was confirmed by a German missionary. He received his early education at Kashenye Village School. Then he had four or five years of schooling at the Kigarama Mission School. At Kigarama Josiah composed songs which he taught to the choir. He also liked theater. He taught ordinary subjects at Kashenye Village School. One day he baptized an old woman who was seriously ill and she recovered.

After passing the examination at Kigarama, he started attending Nyakato Government Secondary School on February 2, 1942. Joel Kibira, his elder brother, was responsible for paying the school fees. Josiah was a tall, slim, attractive young man who showed a talent for leadership.

Wilfred Kilyanga, Josiah's closest friend, commented on his friend's life saying, "Many feared Josiah because he was an extraordinary person."

## **Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa**

**Elina Hankela. *Ubuntu, Migration and Ministry: Being Human in a Johannesburg Church*. Studies in Systematic Theology, Vol. 15. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014. Pp. x, 272. \$89.00 Paperback. ISBN 978-9004271869**

*Ubuntu, Migration and Ministry* invites the reader to rethink *ubuntu* (Nguni: humanness/humanity) as a moral notion in the context of local communities. The socio-moral patterns that emerge at the crossroads between ethnography and social ethics offer a fresh perspective to what it means to be human in contemporary Johannesburg. The Central Methodist Mission is known for sheltering thousands of migrants and homeless people in the inner city. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, primarily conducted in 2009, Elina Hankela unpacks the church leader's liberationist vision of humanity and analyses the tension between the congregation and the migrants, linked to the refugee ministry. While relational virtues mark the community's moral code, various regulating rules and structures shape the actual relationships at the church. Here *ubuntu* challenges and is challenged (from the cover).

**Dick McLellan. *Messengers of Ethiopia: Ethiopian National Missionaries, Bearers of Good News in the Omo River Valley*. Kingsgrove, NSW, Australia: Richard J. McLellan, 2010. Pp. 235. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-646-52476-4.**

This book ... is the sequel to Dick McLellan's first book, *Warriors of Ethiopia*. Dick wrote "not to tell our missionary stories, but to record the stories of the men and women of Ethiopia who took the story of Jesus into the dark places of Ethiopia." In this second book, Dick brings to life more of the lives of these Ethiopian messengers, people who, as "lambs among wolves", went out to bring peace, hope and reconciliation (from the cover).

**Dick McLellan. *Warriors of Ethiopia: Ethiopian National Missionaries, Heroes of the Gospel in the Omo River Valley*. Eastwood, NSW, Australia: Richard J. McLellan, 2006. Pp. 234. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-646-46870-9.**

This little book is about [the intersection between an Australian missionary and] Ethiopian evangelists. It is a brief record of [twenty eight]

25. Ibid., 99.
26. Ibid., 90.
27. Ibid., 100.
28. Malambuigi.

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This article, received in 2016, was written by Steven J. Lloyd, a doctoral candidate at Boston University and an affiliate of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission under the direction of Dr. Dana Robert. The article originally appeared on the CGCM website *A People's History of the School of Theology* ([www.bu.edu/sth-history/prophets/josiah-kibira/](http://www.bu.edu/sth-history/prophets/josiah-kibira/)).

He was very demanding and serious in all his endeavors and always accomplished what he had decided to do.” (Per Larsson 6)

While at Nyakato, Josiah was such a devoted Christian that he was made a church elder. During this time he led evening prayers, taught Bible knowledge to lower classes, and was the choir leader for a group of evangelical students.

For a while he passed through a period of spiritual darkness and rebellion. Josiah said that people thought he was a good Christian at that time while, in reality, he was living a hypocritical life. He even told his schoolmaster, “Let me get old; after that I shall devote myself to spiritual matters.” (Larsson 7)

Two Anglican preachers from the Katoke Teachers' Training College visited Nyakato and preached for three days at Nyakato Secondary School. After listening to their message, Josiah was personally convicted and, at midnight on March 21, 1947, he made a confession of faith, claiming Jesus as his personal savior after saying a simple prayer, “Lord Jesus, come into my heart.” Thus he received Jesus into his heart and believed that he had been forgiven his sins. He confessed his sins to his roommate Wilfred Kilyanga who also confessed his sins to him. The next day Josiah publicly declared his new life in Christ. At that time Josiah was a church elder in the school congregation. As a result of this experience, he changed his hypocritical life and started to live a true Christian life. Kibira said that from that time on he remained a true Christian by his own personal conviction.

Now Kibira felt that he had been liberated and set free. When he completed his education at Nyakato, Mr. Shan, the headmaster, wrote on Josiah's school certificate that he was “exceptionally good” (Per Larsson 9). We now know that Kibira belonged to the revival movement led by the two preachers from the Teachers' College.

From Nyakato Secondary School Kibira went on to attend Tabora Government School in 1948 in order to study to become a teacher. Tabora was also the center for political and nationalistic feelings for Tanganyika which was under British rule at the time. At Tabora Kibira had the opportunity to meet Julius Nyerere and Rashid Kawawa who were to be the future political leaders of an independent Tanganyika. Years later, when Kawawa, a faithful Muslim, visited Bukoba he did not miss the chance of meeting Kibira.

After finishing his studies at Tabora Government School, Kibira graduated as a Grade I teacher. Afterwards he was assigned to teach in church schools in Bukoba and was posted at Kigarama.

On November 25, 1951 Josiah married Martha Jeremiah, also a member of the revival movement. They had five sons and four daughters. Martha recalled that when her husband was a teacher at Lukange in Karagwe District they had only one room and she cooked outside.

The church asked Kibira to come on staff and become the second master at the newly opened secondary school at Kahororo. As a result from 1951 to 1957 Kibira taught in some reputable schools. The Evangelical Church of Buhaya at that time was supported by three missions: the German Bethel Mission that had been there since 1910, the Church of Sweden Mission, replacing the Bethel Mission that left the Buhaya church due to the second World War, and the Danish Missionary Society that joined in the 1950s.

The German Bethel Mission gave Kibira a scholarship to study theology at Bielefeld in order to become a pastor. Consequently he, his wife, and their children left for Germany in 1957. At Bielefeld Kibira fearlessly spoke in favor of the independence of the Buhaya church. He continued practicing revivalism that was new to some Germans. He said that missionaries were also sinners who needed a savior just like Africans (Per Larsson 14).

He finished his theological studies in Germany in 1960 and returned to the Evangelical Church of Buhaya with his family. He was ordained on December 4, 1960 at Kashura church. He was assigned a position at Ndolage congregation, near the Lutheran hospital. Per Larsson writes that after his ordination Kibira never became an ordinary pastor, because of his spontaneity and somewhat explosive temperament. (Larsson 15)

After a while, Kibira left for Germany to finish his theology degree at the Mission Academy in Hamburg. As he did very well he was able to begin a masters in theology. In 1960 Bengt Sundkler, a missionary and lecturer at Uppsala University in Sweden at the time, was elected the first bishop of Buhaya Church. Sundkler had good relationship with Kibira and decided to help him find a place to do a masters of theology. After he found a program at Boston University (U.S.A.), the Lutheran World Federation provided a scholarship for Kibira's studies in Boston from 1962 to 1964.

In May 1964 Kibira wrote to Bishop Sundkler saying that he had finished his program so successfully that he was being offered the opportunity to pursue doctoral studies at Boston University. Sundkler was not in favor of the idea and Kibira returned to Tanzania.

The synod elected Kibira assistant bishop in 1964 even though

5. Malambugi.

6. Klaus Fielder, *Christianity and African Culture: Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900-1940* (Brill, 1996), 72.

7. Malambugi.

8. Ibid.

9. Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Indiana University Press, 1998), 152-153. Gifford's description of the *Balokole* movement is rather limited and somewhat negative.

10. Malambugi.

11. Kibira quoted in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, eds. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Routledge, 2016), 122. This volume also provides deeper insight into the East African revivals.

12. Ibid.

13. This argument is influenced by Robert J. Houle, "The American Mission Revivals and Modern Zulu Evangelism," *Zulu Identities* (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009), 231-35. He argues that when young Zulu migrants underwent sanctification by the Holy Spirit at revivals, it gave them enough spiritual capital to challenge the authority of both white missionaries and the elders.

14. Malambugi.

15. Marja-Liisa Swantz, *Beyond the Forestline: The Life and Letters of Bengt Sundkler* (Gracewing Publishing, 2002), 256-57. Nils Ehrenström was handpicked by the famous ecumenist Nathan Söderblom to go to the Geneva Ecumenical Institute.

16. Ibid.

17. Malambugi

18. "The Winds of Change" was the title of a famous speech given by Harold Macmillan on February 4, 1960. "In the twentieth century, and especially since the end of the war, the processes which gave birth to the nation states of Europe have been repeated all over the world...The wind of change is blowing through this continent [Africa], and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact." The speech made the agenda of decolonization of Africa clear.

19. Swantz, 196-97.

20. Josiah Kibira, *Church, Clan, and the World* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 62-63.

21. Ibid., 66.

22. Ibid., 68.

23. Ibid., 67.

24. Ibid., 67-68.

Nyerere, was so pleased with Kibira that he called a state banquet in the bishop's honor. As president of the LWF, Kibira worked tirelessly to keep ecumenism, social justice, and faithful discipleship on the federation's agenda. He held the post until 1984. [28]

Josiah Kibira died in 1988 after suffering from Parkinson's disease. It was a great loss for both the church in Africa and the world. Kibira was born in a small village by the banks of Lake Victoria, and he eventually died there. Yet during his life, he was part of a global movement, and found himself learning from and leading people in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and North America. His life witnessed to the fundamental nature of the Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—it was both local and global. Kibira was no stranger to the tension of multiple localities being brought into one universal body. As the recent debates over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion demonstrate, local practice, interpretations of scripture, and traditions can lead to conflict at the global level. Yet rather than view these tensions as inevitable points of fracture and schism, Kibira's theology allows for the tensions between local bodies to be constructive at a global level; he showed one could embrace the history and tradition of both church and society, while at the same time exploring new possibilities. Ultimately, Jesus is the focal point of this ecclesiology. The image is almost Eucharistic: the world Church comprises many different people, who often hold radically different views; nevertheless, they all gather at the table around Christ, sharing their experiences, and learning from each other. Looking forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kibira's theology provides an excellent blueprint for a world Church. It is not a church without conflict. It is not a church that ignores various members of the body. It is a radically inclusive space, where all are expected to be true to themselves, and all are asked to be humble and learn from each other.

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#### Endnotes:

1. Angolowisye Isakwisa Malambuigi, "Josiah Mutabuzi Isaya Kibira," *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, <http://www.dacb.org/stories/tanzania/kibira.html>.
2. King Mukotani quoted in Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge, 2000), 594.
3. Sundkler and Steed, 595-596.
4. Isaya Kibira in Malambuigi.

many missionaries disapproved of his election because they feared his radical views and his outspoken attitude; moreover, Kibira was not a Yes man. Nevertheless Kibira became the first African to be elected bishop of the Evangelical Church of Buhaya. He remained an outstanding, undisputed, powerful, and creative leader in this role for more than twenty years.

Kibira excelled both in leading the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Northwestern Diocese and in initiatives in the international community. Sundkler states that a bishop's task is first to serve the local church and secondly the universal church.

Kibira's involvement with the international community of believers can be traced back to the 1961 World Council of Churches (WCC) General Assembly held at New Delhi, when the Evangelical Church of Buhaya became a new member of the WCC. At this meeting Sundkler proposed that Josiah Kibira be a member of the Faith and Order Commission.

In October 1965, Kibira was invited to be the keynote speaker at the All Africa Conference of Churches General Assembly held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The title of his keynote address was "A Living Church in a Changing Society." His Addis Ababa speech made him so famous that at the WCC General Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden in 1968 he was asked to lead the opening worship at the Uppsala cathedral on July 4. Kibira received a lot of attention and was soon considered one of the outstanding personalities in the shaping of the assembly. In 1970, the Lutheran World Federation General Assembly held in Evian, France elected Kibira in absentia chairman of the Commission on Church Cooperation.

In 1977 at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) General Assembly held at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Kibira was the first African to be elected president of the Lutheran World Federation, a position he held up to 1984. His election was a great honor for Tanzania, the host country, and for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. In honor of this special occasion, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere hosted a banquet at the State House and invited the new LWF president and many international guests.

Kibira's legacy to the international church can be summarized in the words of Friedrich Koenig, the German editor of the Lutheran World Information who had closely followed Kibira's initiatives and contribution to the LWF throughout the years. Koenig wrote these words in 1985 when Kibira resigned as bishop of Bukoba:

It would be worthwhile to list and in the future to take up many of the recommendations that undaunted African man of the church made in

life about basic foundations for peace and about the right understanding of the Reformation church's task of mission. Then no one will be able to overlook the words of Josiah Kibira. Lutheranism owes its first senior representative from Africa many thanks for his unswerving veracity, his pious witness to his faith and above all his encouraging example for the youth to whom he was especially committed.

Kibira died on July 18, 1988. In remembrance of his commitment to the cause of the ecumenical movement, the main building at the headquarters of the All Africa Conference of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya was named after Kibira. [1]

Kibira can be described as a very gifted leader who excelled in his leadership roles as local parish pastor and on the international scene as president of the Lutheran World Federation (1977-1984). We can underline several key areas which summarize Kibira's life work. He was committed to the quest for justice--especially for Africa. He was very much devoted to discipleship and to the cross. He was a strong advocate for the ecumenical movement and for his church but he was also committed to the universal church.

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[1] Author's Note: I first heard Kibira preach in 1972 when he visited Makumira Theological College (now Tumaini University). When I was a member (1992-2003) of the General Committee of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) representing all Protestant member churches in Tanzania, one of the General Committee meetings held in Doula, Cameroun, September 10-14, 1996, had on its agenda the task of naming the buildings at the headquarters of AACC in Nairobi. Kibira's name was one of many names proposed for this honor. I stood up and spoke in favor of Kibira's name for the main building. I was then assigned to collect more information on Kibira. After my return to Tanzania, I sent the necessary information to the General Secretary of the AACC, José Chipenda.

**Sources:**

Josiah Kibira, son of Kibira, 47 years old, telephone interview by author, May 10, 2007.

Friedrich Koenig (editor), article, *Lutheran World Information*, 1985.

forgiveness. The Christian's life then becomes a walk in the light and a willingness to repent daily of all sins. From this forgiveness, Christians have a special gift of joy in their lives that cannot be ignored. Out of this spiritual discovery many revival Christians have volunteered to leave their jobs and work for the Church as evangelists and ministers. [25]

Kibira knew that Africa faced major need in the areas of food security, migratory labor, women's and family problems, healthcare, and education. For Kibira, a highly motivated and spiritually charged Church could use its energies to build diaconal, or service, ministries in all of these areas. He wrote, "The church has the responsibility to preach the Gospel to all. But after that it will find that it cannot escape being busy with people. To uplift them, to change their ethnics for the better and to dress their wounds, to feed the hungry and others." [26]

Yet for all of the energy that revival gave to the Churches, it posed still yet another a threat. Sometimes revivals led to theological ideas and practices that fell outside of the Christian tradition and divided the body of Christian believers. Therefore, the revival and the established Church had a lot to gain from each other. As Kibira wrote, "The principle task confronting the official Church is the willingness to listen to the revival. It is only in this was that well-trained theologians will be able to offer their constructive criticism of the revival." [27] Thus, at the Addis Ababa conference, Kibira was able to see the potential and the dangers of various streams of Christian thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From his position at the confluence of the local and global church, he wanted to put these different strands into engagement with each other. This engagement was not always going to be easy. In fact, it could lead to considerable tension. But the tension itself served a constructive purpose for the whole church. The different strands of Christian thought each had something to offer the whole body, and they each served to check the potential dangers of the other.

Kibira's ideas were so well received that he was asked to lead opening worship at the Uppsala Cathedral at the 1968 meeting of the World Council of Churches. His reputation also quickly advanced within Lutheran circles. In 1970, Kibira was elected chairman of the Commission on Church Cooperation for the Lutheran World Federation General Assembly. Perhaps the greatest honor came, however, when Kibira was elected president of the Lutheran World Federation in 1977. He was the first African to hold the position. It was an exciting moment for African Lutherans and a great honor to the Lutheran Church in Tanzania. The president of Tanzania, Julius

The freedom to be African also gave rise to another tension. At Addis Ababa, Kibira talked about two kinds of “tradition.” He said there are traditions—with a small “t”—that represent the unique characteristics and textures of African cultures and societies, and there is Tradition—with a large “T”—that include the Gospels, the Epistles, and Church history. Thus, there was a kind of tension between the local dimension of a specific Church and the universal dimension of the whole Christian church. Here, he addressed the question of indigenization, writing,

There are many good traditions in the African culture which have made an impact on groups of people. These traditions convey unique values. We must be careful before we abandon them as Christianity is introduced. If they are indigenous, then we need to give them Christian meaning and root the Gospel into the African soil. At this point it has to be mentioned that the real “indigenizer” is the African himself. [23]

Again, Kibira placed himself in the tradition of German missionaries. There was, however, one key difference: the foreign missionary was not to be the one to indigenize the church. On the contrary, it would be the African Christians themselves. African Christians understood both traditions and Tradition; they were the ones who could best understand how to root Christianity in African soil. Much of Kibira’s work focused on understanding how African concepts of kinship could dialogue with Christian ideas of fellowship. He attempted to root Christianity in indigenous African worldviews while at the same time offering a model of fellowship to the wider church.

Tradition, regardless of small or large “T’s,” was a chain that related people to their spiritual and familial ancestors. Kibira recognized still another potential problem. He wrote, “Chains can bind; become rigid and sterile.” Many Protestant Churches became set in their ways, the worship became cold, and the general level of commitment dropped. Kibira argued that the Churches needed revival. [24] Much in the same way that his own faith and commitment to the Church was deepened by his experience with the *Balokole* movement, Kibira called on the Churches to always rekindle their spiritual energies, and direct them toward the world.

The main emphasis of the revival has always been “JESUS.” The *Abalokole* maintain that in order to be a Christian, one has to accept Jesus Christ the Son of God as his personal Savior, and that this cannot be achieved unless one repents and puts right the things one had damaged during one’s rebellion and then receives in faith God’s

Per Larsson, *Bishop Josiah Kibira of Bukoba: In an International Perspective* (Dodoma, Tanzania: Central Tanganyika Press, 1992).

Samson Mushemba, president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and successor of Josiah Kibira as bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, telephone interview by author, May 10, 2007.

Josiah Nsangila, 51 years old, from Nshamba/Muleba, Tanzania, interview by the author at Mbeya city on August 24, 2006.

Philemon Tibanenason, 63 years old, from Bukoba, interview by the author at Dar es Salaam city on December 25, 2006.

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**Josiah Kibira (Article 2)**  
**1925 to 1988**  
**Lutheran Church (Balokole Mvt)**  
**Tanzania**

**By Steven J. Lloyd**

Josiah Kibira was a bishop in the Lutheran Church in Tanzania. He also served as president of the Lutheran World Federation (1977-1984). In his ministry and leadership, he put forward a view of the Church as both global and local; he brought together the center and the periphery.

From a small fishing village on the shores of Lake Victoria to the presidency of the Lutheran World Federation, Josiah Kibira knit the concerns of both the local and the global church together into a single garment. He came in contact with numerous strands of the Christian tradition, which drove him to profound theological reflection on the nature and meaning of Christianity for Africa, as well as the significance of Africa for Christianity. Kibira was able to see the potential within different streams of theology, but he also saw the dangers. No one thinker had “the whole truth,” but rather he sought to give all voices a place at the table.

**Early Life**

In late August of 1925, in Bukoba, Tanzania, Esteria Kibira gave birth to a son. She lived with her husband, Isaya Kibira, and a co-wife; they were members of the Haya ethnic group. Only days after his birth, the child became desperately ill, and it was not clear whether he would live. When the child pulled through the sickness, Isaya named him Josiah Mutabuzi. Josiah is a biblical name meaning “the Lord heals,” and in the Haya language, Mutabuzi means “he is a savior.” Isaya died while Josiah was still young, and he remembered being raised by his devout mother. As he said, “[my mother] tried to teach us how we should follow the Lord and that we had to go to church. She also taught us to pray and sing. I especially learned from her how to pray in faith and very simply.” [1]

Josiah’s father played a pivotal role in bringing Christianity to Bukoba. According to the historian Bengdt Sundkler, the kings of the Bukoba region were not particularly keen on having Christian missionaries in the area. They were the guardians of the traditional moral order and feared that white foreigners would undermine them. King Mukotani said,

the course of his life. He identified a number of tensions facing the Churches in Africa. Reflecting some of the older German theologies, Kibira called on the church in Africa to be authentically African. The Churches in Africa, he argued, needed not only political but also spiritual freedom to fully come into themselves. He wrote:

Both ecclesiological and theological freedom are lacking in African churches. There is need for change of the church’s ecclesiological foreign image and [to] make it more indigenous. This change must affect church buildings, liturgy, forms of worship, and symbolism...We depend mostly on advisors from Europe and America. Our Theological Boards are very inadequate as long as they reflect American, Swedish, or German Lutheran theologies rather than African theologies...Research into African religious beliefs has revealed that nearly all Africans believed in God. Some tribes possessed an elaborate religious system including superstition, magic and ancestral worship, taboos, and reverence of the sacred and the aged. If this is true, then theologians are needed today to find out what all these African beliefs have in common...[and] these data must be evaluated in light of the Christian message. [20]

Yet after affirming this, Kibira went on to note how spiritual freedom posed a serious challenge to unity. Differences in thought, practice, and opinion could easily cause friction, and Kibira did not want to superficially do away with difference to find the lowest common denominator of agreement. To do so, after all, would only limit freedom of thought. His solution to this problem was one of unity amid diversity. “We are Lutherans,” he wrote, “we know ‘in whom’ and ‘what’ we believe. We have particular emphasis in our doctrine; especially in this precious one—‘Justification by faith alone’—and in many others. But this, our very heritage, is our challenge.” [21] Kibira argued that Lutherans needed to make their position clear within ecumenical discourse, seeking to share the insights of their own particular body with the rest of the Church. Even if the unique insights of each denomination conflicted, all needed to participate in the dialogue from their own unique position. There was also much to be gained from such open conversation. Kibira wrote, “We [Lutherans] rejoice because we have a relatively clear understanding of our confession...Yet, at the same time, we would be wrong if we would bluntly say: ‘We have the whole truth.’ Such a generalization would be ‘killing faith.’” [22] In this way, diversity could be maintained while unity and fuller depth of knowledge was established through conversation.

parish. Yet rather than focusing on this as a problem, Sundkler saw the potential for leadership. At the 1961 meeting of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, Sundkler nominated Josiah Kibira to be a member of the faith and order commission. [14] Likewise, working in conjunction with the Lutheran World Federation, he found scholarship money to send Kibira to Boston University, where the latter studied from 1962 to 1964. Sundkler remembered visiting Kibira at Boston, saying that his protégé had adopted local American customs. When Sundkler arrived, Kibira took him around to various students at the school, introducing them to “my bishop from Bukoba.” According to Sundkler, this was “a thing that only Americans could do.” [15] At Boston University, Kibira studied with Sundkler’s old acquaintance from Sweden, Nils Ehrenström. Ehrenström, who was a veteran of the Life and Work movement, taught as professor of Ecumenism at Boston University from 1955 until 1969. [16] By 1964, Kibira earned his masters at the School of Theology, and had an offer to begin work on a doctoral dissertation. Sundkler, however, had other plans for him. [17]

Kibira returned to an independent Lutheran Church in Tanzania—formed in 1963. Across Africa, “the winds of change” were blowing, and increasingly more Africans demanded their independence from Europeans in all areas of life. [18] This was a call that many missionaries heeded. Sundkler knew that the time for an African bishop had come. In conjunction with the pastors and the diocese, it was decided that Sundkler would carry on acting as bishop with an African assistant. In 1964, the synod elected Kibira. He was consecrated in September of the same year, 100 years after the first African Anglican bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The consecration was very much an ecumenical event; Moravians, Anglicans, and Lutherans all participated. Kibira would not be Sundkler’s assistant for long. Only three months later, Sundkler returned to Sweden, leaving the diocese in the hands of his former assistant. Kibira worked as bishop of the Northwestern Diocese of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania for the next two decades. [19]

### **Global Leader**

Sundkler stepped aside so that Kibira could come into the limelight. As bishop, Kibira was able to develop his ecclesiological vision for Africa on the ecumenical stage. In October of 1965, Kibira gave the keynote speech at the All Africa Conference of Churches in Addis Ababa. In his speech, entitled “A Changing Church in a Living Society,” Kibira utilized and synthesized the various streams of thought that he had been learning and developing over

“If the whites are allowed to teach everywhere, what will not this new religion do? Will not then even our rivers and forests ‘believe?’ Will our sacred trees escape and not be cut down like ordinary trees?” [2] It was only after the German colonial government put pressure on these leaders that the White Fathers built catholic mission stations in the area. Yet it was not at these stations that Isaya came in contact with Christianity. He was a fisherman and trader who traversed the banks of Lake Victoria in his canoe. Crossing into Uganda, Isaya and his fellow traders came in contact with the Anglican Church Mission Society. Over the course of five trips and several years, missionaries and Buganda converts introduced Isaya to a whole new world of roads, bridges, education, and modern medicine. It was also here that he learned about Christianity. Back in Bukoba, Isaya taught people what he had learned and gathered a community of believers around him. As Christianity was not popular in the region, they met secretly in a cave by the banks of the Lake. When Pastor Ernst Johanssen from the German Bethel Society came to Bukoba in 1907, he did not need to plant a church—rather he built on the foundations already laid by Isaya. [3] As Isaya died, he said “My sons still carry on what I wanted to do and could not achieve.” [4]

The Bethel missionary at Bukoba baptized the young Josiah, and as he came of age, he received an early education at Kashenye Village School and religious instruction from the missionaries. At fifteen, he was confirmed. [5] The German missionaries were particularly sensitive to African culture. Bruno Gutmann, Traugott Bachmann, and Ernst Johanssen believed that God was present within and (imperfectly) revealed through African religion, social order, and customs. Because of this, it was not the objective of German missionaries to completely overturn African culture; on the contrary, they wanted to preserve and Christianize it. The objective of the missionary was only to introduce a people (*Volk*) to the gospel. In the same way that missionaries believed that Africans knew about God before their arrival, they also believed that Africans already had a God-given sense of ethics. According to this view, Christianity and African religions shared an ethical basis. To be sure, the German missionaries were not completely tolerant; they argued that some aspects of traditional culture were contrary to the gospel. Nevertheless, even those elements of traditional culture, social order, and religious rites that contradicted the gospel could be Christianized and used in the service of a people’s unique Church (*Volkskirche*). Finally, German missionaries believed that the greatest danger for Africans came from European “civilization.” Espousing a romantic view, they believed that modernity, with its accompanying

migratory labor, free market economies, and a sense of individualism, destroyed the stable social fabric of African village and church life. [6] While these exact points may not have been made within a catechism class, Kibira was a product of a missionary education that attempted to reconcile the gospel with African culture. As Kibira matured as a theologian, he too would tackle the question of what it meant to be both African and Christian.

### Higher Education

Kibira proved to be an apt student, and continued his education at the Kigarama Secondary School. He wrote hymns, participated in the choir, and took an interest in theater. It was also at Kigarama that Kibira began his lifelong ministry. According to Angolowisye Malambugi, at Kigarama, Kibira baptized a sick elderly woman who miraculously recovered. After passing his examination, Kibira went on to the Nyakato Government Secondary School in 1942. He was a fastidious Christian in those days, and his friends remembered him as both earnest and hard working. He excelled in academics, led prayer services, and conducted Bible studies. The church leadership even made Kibira an elder. [7]

But his Christian religion gained another dimension at this time. Kibira came in contact with a movement that made him reconsider his previous life. [8] Beginning in the 1930s, the fires of the Balokole revival swept through the East African Protestant mission churches. Balokole, meaning “the saved ones,” criticized the lax attitude of “lukewarm Christians,” and called people to a sincere faith and high standards of morality. The Balokole formed their own kind of clan, separating themselves from their nominal Christian neighbors, attempting to live an exemplary life that refused to compromise with the “world.” Even so, for the most part, the Balokole remained within the Protestant Churches. [9]

Two Anglican preachers of the Balokole tradition arrived at Nyakato in March 1947 and preached for three days on the necessity of sincere conversion and an uncompromising position toward the world. These words resonated with Kibira, and forced him to re-narrate his own life. He decided that he had been a hypocrite up to that point—his outward actions may have appeared holy, but he had not really committed himself fully to Christ. At midnight on March 21, 1947, Kibira said the following prayer, “Lord Jesus, come into my heart.” He confessed his sins to his roommate and declared himself reborn the next morning. [10]

The Balokole movement provided Kibira with new possibilities. Through the movement, he met Martha Yeremiah. The two were no doubt drawn together by shared experience and piety, and they married. Traditionally, however, the marriage would not have happened. As Kibira recalled,

According to Customary Law I had no right to marry this woman as she was of a royal family and I came from a quite simple fisherman’s family. I had myself obtained the consent of my wife. She had got permission from her father to marry a young man whom she would choose. [11]

They were both members of the Balokole movement, and they chose each other. This marked a new pattern of social arrangements in East Africa.

Both the German missionaries and the members of the Balokole movement were committed to local communities. Nevertheless, both German Lutheran missionaries and the Balokole had ties with various world-wide movements. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, local Protestant bodies throughout the work were linked into global networks that came in contact at ecumenical conferences and in universities. In 1957, after spending some time as a teacher in Tanzania, Josiah went to the Bethel Mission’s Kirchliche Hochschule in Beilefeld, West Germany. There he studied to be a minister. [12] He brought revivalist methods to Germany, and in doing so upset the standard European/missionary hierarchy. The paternalistic assumption of missions was that converts learned at the feet of white missionaries. Yet Kibira claimed that missionaries needed to be humbled before Christ in the same way that Africans did. This also meant that white missionaries did not have unique access to Christ and the Christian tradition, and therefore did not deserve unique leadership within the Churches. [13]

### Bishop at Boston University

Kibira was an outspoken advocate of an independent Lutheran Church. He was an exacting Christian with a radical bent. The combination could prove to be upsetting and perhaps a little frustrating or even terrifying to missionaries who supported the status quo. Yet one white missionary found in Kibira a worthy leader. Bengt Sundkler, who will long be remembered as a skilled linguist, ethnographer, historian, and missionary, was appointed bishop of Bukoba in 1960. Kibira had both too grand a vision and too little patience to make a good village pastor—he did not fit comfortably into one